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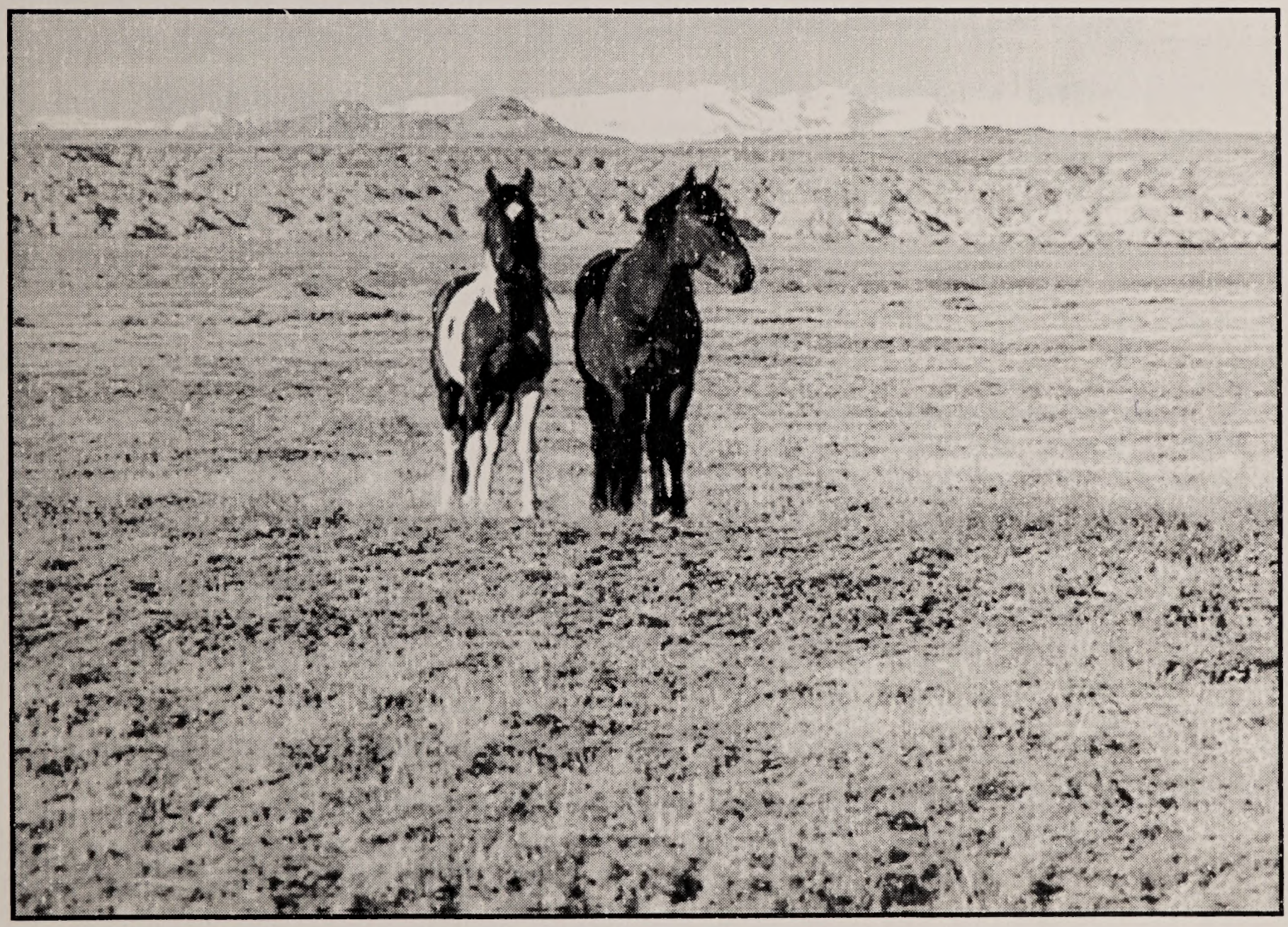
July 2000

Environmental Assessment Wild Horse Gathering for the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area

EA No. WY-010-EA0-083



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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Worland Field Office
P.O. Box 119
Worland, Wyoming 82401-0119

Dear Reader:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Worland Field Office (WFO), proposes to gather excess wild horses in the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area (HMA), during the fall of 2000. This action would be implemented under the authority of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, as amended, and this environmental assessment (EA) and capture plan. The purpose for management of wild, free roaming horses is to comply with law and policy pertaining to wild, free roaming horses on public lands. The policy of the BLM addresses a range of topics including establishment and maintenance of Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs) in Herd Management Areas (HMAs) in a humane, safe, efficient, and environmentally sound manner.

This EA is being distributed to the public for a 30-day public review and comment. Comments on the EA are due by August 29, 2000. Please send your comment to:

BLM - Worland Field Office
P. O. Box 119
Worland, WY 82401-0119
ATTN: Cam Henrichsen

Comments may also be e-mailed to: Cam_Henrichsen@blm.gov

Comments, including the names and street addresses of respondents will be available for public review at the above address during regular business hours (7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except federal holidays). Comments may also be published as part of the Decision Record. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name or street address from public review or from public disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your written comment. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as a representative or officials of organizations or businesses, will be available for public inspection.

Your comments will be considered before BLM issues the final decision.

The enclosed EA serves as the basis for complying with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. This action is in conformance with existing land use plans, including evaluations of Herd Management Areas (HMAs) since that time.

Copies of this EA are available at the Worland Field Office, 101 South 23rd Street in Worland. If you have any questions, please contact Cam Henrichsen, Range Management Specialist or Joe Vessels, Assistance Field Manager at (307) 347-5100.

Sincerely,

Darrell Barnes

Field Manager

DATE MAILED:

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WILD HORSE GATHERING
for the
FIFTEENMILE WILD HORSE HERD
MANAGEMENT AREA

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA No. WY-010-EA0-083

PREPARED BY

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
WORLAND FIELD OFFICE

JULY 2000

Abbreviations

AML	appropriate management levels
AUM	animal unit months
BLM	U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management
CFR	code of federal regulations
EA	environmental assessment
HMA	Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area
IMP	Interim Management Policy
OAS	U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Aircraft Services
WFO	Bureau of Land Management, Worland Field Office
WSA	wilderness study area

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PURPOSE AND NEED FOR MANAGEMENT OF WILD HORSES

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Worland Field Office (WFO), proposes to gather excess wild horses in the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area (HMA), during the fall of 2000. This action would be implemented under the authority of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, as amended, and this environmental assessment (EA) and capture plan (Appendix).

PURPOSE

The purpose for management of wild, free roaming horses is to comply with law and policy pertaining to wild, free roaming horses on public lands. The policy of the BLM addresses a range of topics including establishment and maintenance of Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs) in Herd Management Areas (HMAs) in a humane, safe, efficient, and environmentally sound manner.

NEED

The need for management of wild, free roaming horses is to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and to preserve the multiple-use relationship that exists in the areas affected by wild horses. Management is needed to maintain the health of the public rangelands that wild horses and other animals depend on and to insure that BLM activities are in conformance with 43 CFR 4180. It also enables the BLM to maintain horse populations at levels that will prevent unwanted damage to State and privately-owned lands within and adjacent to the HMA.

CONFORMANCE WITH LAND USE PLAN

The proposed action is in conformance with the *Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan* (RMP) for the Grass Creek Planning Area, signed in September, 1998, which established the following objective for wild horse management in the WFO jurisdiction.

> "In the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area (herd area), maintain free-roaming wild horses in a thriving ecological balance." [Page 21.]

The RMP specified the following management actions necessary to achieve the above objective:

> "The herd area will be managed for an initial herd size of at least 70 and no greater than 160 mature animals. To the extent possible, horses will be managed at the lower end of this range during periods of drought." [Page 21]
>
> "The Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Gathering Plan will be kept up-to-date and implemented for roundups. Emphasis will be placed on gathering horses that wander outside the herd area or onto privately-owned lands." [Page 21.]

Wild horses will be allocated 2,300 animal unit months (AUMs) of forage annually." [Page 22.]

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER STATUTES, REGULATIONS, OR OTHER PLANS

Gathering excess wild horses is in compliance with Public Law 92-195 (Wild

Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971) as amended by Public Law 94-579 (Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976), and Public Law 95-514 (Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978). Public law 92-195, as amended, requires the protection, management, and control of wild free-roaming horses and burros on public lands. The preparation and transport of wild horses will be conducted in conformance with all applicable state statutes.

The following are excerpts from the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) relating to the protection, management, and control of wild horses under the administration of the BLM.

> 43 CFR 4700.0-2 One of the objectives, is to manage wild horses "as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands under the principle of multiple use..."
>
> 43 CFR 4710.3-1 "Herd management area shall be established [through the land use planning process] for maintenance of wild horse and burro herds."
>
> 43 CFR 4710.4 Management of wild horses and burros shall be undertaken with the objective of limiting the animals' distribution to herd areas"
>
> 43 CFR 4720.1 "Upon examination of current information and a determination by the authorized officer that an excess of wild horses or burros exists, the authorized officer shall remove the excess animals immediately".

Under 43 CFR 4180 it is required that all BLM management actions achieve or maintain healthy rangelands.

All federal actions must be reviewed to determine their probable effect on threatened and endangered plants and animals (the Endangered Species Act).

Federal actions must also be reviewed to determine their probable effect on cultural and historic properties. This process is termed section 106 consultation (Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act).

This EA references the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area Plan (1985), and the Evaluation and Update to the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area Plan/ Capture Plan (1990) (EA No. WY-016-EA0-008). These documents contain specific management prescriptions for the HMA, as well as information on the existing environment and the environmental impacts of the management actions. These documents were affirmed by the Interior Board of Land Appeals in Animal Protection Institute of America et al. (IBLA 90-412).

No other permits or authorizing actions are required prior to implementing the Proposed Action.

ALTERNATIVES

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action

The population of the Fifteenmile wild horse herd would be reduced to the lower range of the AML (70 mature horses, or approximately 100 total horses). Approximately 160 horses would be removed from the area. A primary focus would be placed on gathering horses that are on grazing allotments outside of the HMA. All areas outside of the HMA would be considered total removal areas.

Gathering operations would be conducted as described in the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Capture Plan (Appendix), and would start around the beginning of September, 2000, requiring approximately two weeks for completion. In the event that weather or other factors prevent a gather at this time, the operation would be conducted in October, 2000. If some unforeseen factors prevent a gather in the fall of 2000, the operation would be conducted at about the same time in 2001.

No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, no gathering would take place. The herd would be allowed to increase until it reached levels where predation and environmental factors, coupled with density-dependant adjustments in reproductive rates stabilized the populations. This alternative would not be in conformance with the Grass Creek RMP.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED IN DETAIL

Adjustment of Appropriate Management Level

In consideration of many factors, including extensive public input, the appropriate management level (AML) for the Fifteenmile HMA was set in the Grass Creek RMP at 70 to 160 mature wild horses, unless monitoring data shows that changes in the population level are necessary. The Evaluation and Update to the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area Plan/Capture Plan (EA No. WY-016-EA0-008) supports this AML based upon vegetation monitoring data. Vegetation monitoring conducted since then, which includes Wyoming Permanent 10-Plot Trend Transects, as well as forage utilization data and use pattern mapping, has not indicated a need to adjust the AML. This data is located in the allotment files for the individual grazing allotments which make up the HMA (LU Allotment No. 00604, Badger Gulch Allotment No. 00652, Allen Basin Allotment No. 00669, Pitchfork Allotment No. 00676, Hunt Oil Fifteenmile Allotment No. 00682).

Closure of the HMA to Livestock Grazing

Existing planning decisions provide for maintaining populations of wild horses in this area and for providing the opportunity for livestock grazing. The cumulative impacts of wild horse management in conjunction with livestock grazing have been analyzed in the

land use plan. Closure of the HMA to livestock grazing would not be in conformance with the Grass Creek RMP.

If livestock grazing was reduced or eliminated in order to increase the AML, the AML would still be determined in a manner which would insure a thriving natural ecological balance, and the maintenance of those higher horse populations would have effects essentially the same as the proposed action.

Elimination of Wild Horses from the HMA

This alternative was not analyzed in detail because the land use planning process has affirmed that the public, in general, wishes to see the Act complied with and wishes to have healthy horses on healthy habitats within the area. This alternative would not be in conformance with the Grass Creek RMP.

Fertility Control

Under this alternative, wild horses would be gathered in order to administer fertility control agents. Current, best available technology would be employed. That consists of an intramuscular injection given to reproductive aged mares. This treatment effectively suppresses reproduction in +/- 95 percent of treated mares for one 7- to 10-month period. Treated and untreated animals would be returned to the range and the suppression of reproduction would become the primary agent for maintaining the populations at the prescribed levels. A suitable horse-handling facility for this operation would need to be constructed in or near the HMA.

The effects of this suppression of the reproductive rate on genetic viability is not known. Further, while the effects of various methods of immunocontraception on individual animals can be predicted in terms of the specific physiological response to the agents administered, the subsequent effect of the presence of varying numbers of treated animals upon the interaction of groups of animals is not known.

In addition to the logistical problems involved in employing this alternative in the Fifteenmile HMA, fertility control alone would not effectively maintain the wild horse population and its habitat in a healthy and stable state. However, further analysis could well identify a level of fertility control which would be a

responsible part of a management strategy for wild horses and their habitat in the HMA in the future.

Alternative Gathering Methods

Hay and water trapping methods require that these resources be scarce. In the Fifteenmile HMA, adequate forage, except during severe winters with substantial snow cover, makes hay trapping impractical. When conditions might allow some limited success, drifting snow and road conditions limit access. Water availability varies greatly from year to year and season to season. While water trapping may prove effective during extreme drought periods, the possibility of occasional rain showers, which would provide abundant water supplies for short time-periods, make water trapping impractical. Rounding up wild horses with saddle horses alone has proven to be inefficient and impractical.

The helicopter/roping method of gathering entails moving wild horses to a roping site by helicopter and then capturing the horses by roping. While feasible, this technique has been used only in limited circumstances where a small number of wild horses were difficult to trap. It poses safety hazards to wild horses, personnel, and their saddle horses. For these reasons this alternative, as a primary method of gathering, was dropped from further consideration.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Worland Field Office area of jurisdiction is located in northwestern Wyoming, covering the central and southern portion of the Bighorn Basin. The HMA is located in the upper end of the Fifteenmile Creek watershed northwest of Worland (see Map located at the end of this document). The HMA encompasses about 83,130 acres of land. Approximately 7,000 acres within the HMA (about 8 percent) is privately owned. The Fifteenmile Creek watershed is characterized by badland topography and high levels of erosion. Annual precipitation ranges from 4 to 12 inches per year, with an average of 7.8 inches per year.

About half of the precipitation falls during the growing season of April through June, with the remainder coming in high intensity summer thunderstorms. Water availability is frequently a major concern in the HMA, due largely to the low precipitation and high siltation levels.

Critical elements of the human environment (USDI-BLM 1988) and their potential to be affected by the Proposed Action and alternatives must be considered. These critical elements are listed below. The elements that are determined to be not affected will not be analyzed or discussed further in this document.

Critical Elements					
	Affected			Affected	
Critical Element	Yes	No	Critical Element	Yes	No
Air Quality		X	Nat. Amer. Rel. Concerns		X
Areas of Critical Environmental Concern		X	Threatened & Endangered Species		X
Cultural Resources	X		Wastes, Hazardous/Solid		X
Environmental Justice		X	Water Quality, Surface/Ground		X
Farmlands, Prime/Unique		X	Wetlands/Riparian Zones		X
Floodplains		X	Wild & Scenic Rivers		X
Invasive, Nonnative Species		X	Wilderness	X	

WILD HORSES

The Fifteenmile HMA was established in 1985. The current wild horse population is estimated to be 230 horses, based upon the latest inventory. The horse population at the end of the 2000 foaling period is projected to be about 260 horses. The AML is 70 to 160 mature horses, which are considered to be horses 2 years of age and older. When foals and yearlings are added, the total horse population ranges from 100 to 240 total horses. The Grass Creek RMP allocated a total of 2,300 AUMs of forage for wild horses, which is the amount of forage required to sustain the wild horse population at the upper range of the AML.

Some of the horses frequently travel outside of the HMA onto adjacent grazing allotments.

The following allotments are regularly used by wild horses:

New Burlington Allotment No. 00509
Fernandez Blu-Jay Allotment No. 00510
South Tatman Allotment No. 00612
Timber Creek Allotment No. 00626
Tatman Mountain Common Allotment No. 00639
Snyder Allotment No. 00640
West Five Mile Allotment No. 00651
North Tatman Allotment No. 00674

Approximately 80 horses are currently known to be outside of the HMA. A small band of horses, approximately 15 head, is located in the Fivemile area about 15 miles east of the HMA.

A diversity of coat colors (bay, brown, black, sorrel, chestnut, white, buckskin, gray, palomino, blue, red and strawberry roans) and patterns can be found in the Fifteenmile wild horses. The animals tend to be moderate to large sized for light horses. Habitat conditions are such that the horses are in very good physical condition.

The horses' social structure, combined with their size, strength, and adaptability allows them to compete favorably with wildlife and domestic livestock. Horses often travel 2 to 5 miles to consume 10 to 12 gallons of water per day. No predation of wild horses has been documented in the HMA, and it is considered to have little or no effect on the wild horse population.

DOMESTIC LIVESTOCK

There are five unfenced grazing allotments comprising the HMA. These grazing allotments are:

LU Allotment No. 00604 (part)
Badger Gulch Allotment No. 00652
Allen Basin Allotment No. 00669
Pitchfork Allotment No. 00676
Hunt Oil 15 Mile Allotment No. 00862

The total authorized livestock grazing on these allotments is 7,925 AUMs. This use is authorized as winter sheep use, from November through March. The majority of this livestock use has been in voluntary non-use for several years, but could be activated at any time by the permittees.

In contrast to the amount of authorized livestock use, the overall recommended stocking level for both livestock and wild horses in the HMA is about 5,670 AUMs, based on rangeland vegetation inventory data. The Grass Creek RMP specified that annual forage use by domestic livestock would not be allowed to exceed 3,370 AUMs. This forage allocation issue will be addressed in the upcoming revision of the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area Plan.

WILDLIFE

The HMA provides year-long habitat for pronghorn antelope, mule deer, sage grouse, Hungarian partridge, chukar, and various raptors, songbirds, furbearers, and small mammals. Other game species that have been seen in the area are elk, white-tailed deer, moose, and mountain lion. Mountain plovers (a proposed threatened and endangered species) are likely to inhabit the area. Crucial winter range has been identified in the HMA for both pronghorn antelope and mule deer.

VEGETATION AND SOILS

The majority of soils in the HMA are desert soils developed under low precipitation with minimal topsoil development—*aridisols* and *entisols*. The soils are mostly fine textured with areas of sand dunes, badlands, and saline areas with severe erosion potentials when disturbed. Loss of topsoil from these desert soils leads to an irreplaceable loss in soil productivity, and thus the ability to regain natural plant communities, if lost.

Vegetation in the HMA varies from desert shrub to sagebrush/grass. Major plant species in the desert shrub-type consist of Gardner's saltbush, greasewood, Indian ricegrass, Sandberg bluegrass, bottlebrush squirreltail, saltgrass, and pricklypear cactus. Wyoming big sagebrush, bluebunch wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, needle-and-

thread, prairie junegrass, and blue grama are the primary components of the sagebrush/ grass type. The majority of the rangelands in the HMA are considered to be in fair to good condition, with an upward trend. This determination is based upon data from a total of twelve Wyoming Permanent 10-Plot Trend Transects located in the HMA, which have been monitored since 1983. The favorable range condition and upward trend can be partially attributed to the large amount of non-use taken in the past by the livestock permittees, generally above normal precipitation over the past few years, and maintaining the wild horse population within the AML.

Fifteenmile Creek is a cottonwood-lined ephemeral stream that originates above the HMA, and flows through the center of the HMA before draining into the Bighorn River at Worland. The Fifteenmile Creek watershed has been identified by the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality as a watershed in need of further study. Siltation from Fifteenmile Creek into the Bighorn River has been a primary focus of concern in recent years. There are also numerous smaller drainages and reservoirs scattered throughout the HMA.

RECREATION

Some members of the public enjoy seeing wild horses roaming free in the Fifteenmile area. Both residents and nonresidents occasionally make special trips to the area to view wild horses in their natural environment. Visitor use has not been documented due to its random nature and the fact that anyone is free to drive out and see the wild horses.

Other recreation in the HMA is quite dispersed with the greatest amount occurring during the hunting seasons for the various game animals and birds. Some other recreational uses of the area include mountain biking, horseback riding, all-terrain vehicle use, sightseeing, and photography.

WILDERNESS

All or part of three wilderness study areas (WSAs) could potentially be affected by the proposed action. The Bobcat Draw WSA, covering 18,540 acres, is located almost entirely within the south-east part of the HMA. A small portion of the Sheep Mountain WSA is located in the north-east part of the HMA. The wild horses in the Fivemile area, approximately 15 miles east of the HMA, are frequently found in or near the Red Butte WSA.

Until these areas are designated wilderness or released from further consideration by Congress, they are managed under the Interim Management Policy (IMP) for lands under wilderness review. Under the IMP, WSAs are managed to preserve their wilderness character (naturalness, solitude, and opportunities for primitive recreation) and suitability for designation as wilderness. Fundamental to this preservation is prohibition of new surface disturbance or permanent structures so that the WSAs retain the character of an area untrammeled by humans. If designated wilderness, the WSAs would be managed in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964.

HERITAGE RESOURCES

Only a small fraction of the land surface within the HMA has been inventoried for heritage resources. As a result, archaeologists have recorded only 29 archaeological properties. Prehistoric sites known to exist within the HMA include open camps, lithic scatters, and rock art. Historic sites include trash dumps, trails, roads, and structures associated with the local farming and ranching industries. Heritage Resource Program support for the wild horse capture would consist of a Class III inventory at the location of the horse trap prior to horse capture. Support includes consultation with the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office according to the Wyoming State Protocol of the BLM's National Programmatic Agreement.

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ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

INTRODUCTION

Resources that may be impacted by the Proposed Action and the No Action alternatives include wild horses, domestic livestock, wildlife, vegetation and soils, recreation, wilderness, and heritage resources. The direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts are addressed for each resource.

WILD HORSES

General

Wild horses would be subjected to a certain amount of stress under both the Proposed Action and No Action alternatives. Removal of excess horses would result in stress from gathering, sorting, transportation, and adoption. Under the No Action Alternative, increased wild horse populations would eventually result in stress from competition for limited habitat, reduced forage and water supplies, and degrading physical condition.

Proposed Action

Gathering would be conducted in accordance with selective removal criteria, or the current national policy in effect at the time of the gather. The number of excess wild horses to be removed is based on the projected 2000 post-foaling population in relation to the AML. No gathering would take place during the spring foaling period.

Under this alternative, horses left on the range would have adequate forage, water, and space. A thriving natural ecological balance would exist within the HMA and adjacent to it. Maintaining the population at AML would benefit the remaining horses by improving the quality and quantity of forage. Adopted animals would undergo a lifestyle change.

Wild horses would be placed under stress as a result of being captured, transported, prepared, and adopted. Minor injuries such as scrapes, bites, and bruising are likely to occur. Some horses may be inadvertently injured or killed; however, past experience has shown that this number has been less than 1 percent of the horses gathered. There is a potential for young foals to become separated from their mothers. Every effort would be made to reunite the foal with its mother.

Transporting horses from the trap to a holding/sorting facility has the potential to injure the animals. The horses would be transported in a manner that would allow them to keep their footing during the trip, minimizing injury. Wood shavings would be used on the flooring to help provide secure footing. Horses would be loaded loosely enough to insure that if one did get down, it would have enough room to regain its footing.

The cumulative effects of gathering horses over time were analyzed through wild horse population modeling, which was developed by Dr. Steve Jenkins at the University of Nevada at Reno. This model has been used to predict the outcome of removal activities on the wild horse population. In the population model, an initial population size of 260 horses was used, which is the projected population size after the 2000 foaling period. Since selective removal was employed during the last removal in 1994, the current population is skewed toward older males, with an estimated male:female ratio of 60:40. In the model, removals were initiated when the population size reached 240 horses, with a target of 100 horses remaining after the removal. Removals would be conducted a minimum of 3 years apart. Several removal scenarios were analyzed, including the current selective removal criteria, random removal of all age classes, or total removal of horses age 12 and over, with these older horses being sent to a long-term pasturing facility. Each scenario was run for a period of 10 years, with 30 trials per year. The results of each scenario are displayed as the mean of all trials, with a 95 percent confidence interval.

Under the current selective removal policy, the population model indicates that the herd could be maintained within the AML over the next 10 years. However, reaching the lower end of the AML would not be possible due to the lack of young horses for removal. Removals would need to be conducted every 3 years, with nearly 600 horses gathered over the 10 year period to remove approximately 300 horses. The projected annual growth rate of the herd would be approximately 13 percent.

In the random removal scenario, the population model indicates that the herd could be maintained within the AML of 100 to 240 horses, with removals conducted every 5 to 6 years. All horses that are captured would be removed in this scenario, until the population was reduced to 100 horses. This would leave a more natural age structure within the herd, instead of the population favoring older horses as under the selective removal policy. The projected annual growth rate of the herd in this scenario would be approximately 17 percent.

If the BLM adopts a long-term pasturing facility policy for older horses, the population model indicates that the herd could be maintained within the AML over the next 10 years, with removals conducted every 5 years. Approximately 410 horses would need to be gathered to remove approximately 340 horses during the next 10 years. In this scenario, the projected annual growth rate of the herd would be approximately 20 percent. This higher growth rate is due to the lack of natural death loss of older horses, which would be removed.

Maintaining wild horse populations at AML would result in no cumulative impacts to the long-term viability of the wild horse herd, and would aid in the attainment of a thriving ecological balance in their habitat. If future monitoring of the wild horse herd and genetic analysis indicated that genetic viability was threatened, horses from another HMA would be brought in to the Fifteenmile HMA to the long-term viability of the herd.

No Action

With this alternative, horses would not experience the stress associated with gathering, removal, or adoption. According to the population model, if no horses were removed from the Fifteenmile HMA, the population would increase at an annual rate of approximately 18 percent. The population size would approach 1,500 horses within the next 10 years, which is well above the carrying capacity of the HMA.

The herd would show obvious signs of ill-fitness including poor individual animal condition, low birth rates, and high mortality rates in all age classes due to disease and/or increased vulnerability to predation. In addition, supporting range conditions would noticeably deteriorate. As the population increased, competition for space would increase with all the associated stress. Social interaction would change. Horses would die of starvation, disease, or from lack of water. These impacts would be cumulative over time.

DOMESTIC LIVESTOCK

General

While at present there is no direct competition between wild horses and domestic livestock within the HMA, due the amount of non-use taken by the livestock permittees, there is competition for forage and water between livestock and wild horses which are on grazing allotments outside of the HMA. Also, the livestock permits within the HMA could be activated by the permittees at any time. In general, increased wild horse numbers would result in increased competition between horses and livestock.

Proposed Action

Under this alternative, there would be no long-term effect on domestic livestock. Reaching the AML and maintaining the horse population at this level would the quality and quantity of forage for domestic livestock, both in and near the HMA, would be adequate. Temporary stress which could occur in conjunction with gathering operations would be minimized or avoided by careful attention to timing and location of activities and close communication with the owners of the domestic livestock. No adverse cumulative impacts to domestic livestock are anticipated.

No Action

Under this alternative, increasing horse populations would first displace livestock in the HMA, and then over time in adjacent areas surrounding the HMA. Displacement would be slow and indirect. As competition for forage and water increased, it would become less economically favorable to utilize the areas with domestic livestock. Authorized livestock grazing would be reduced or eliminated. This would have a negative economic impact on livestock producers. Range conditions in and around the HMA would deteriorate significantly. These impacts would be cumulative over time.

WILDLIFE

Proposed Action

Under this alternative, the horses left on the range would have adequate forage, water, and space. Wildlife species would be able to live in a natural ecological balance within the HMA and adjacent to it. Improved quality and increased quantity of forage would help to obtain or maintain objective wildlife populations as defined by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Wildlife populations in areas where excess wild horses are gathered could be disrupted for a short time during the gathering operations. Once gathering operations cease, these effects would stop. The short-term effects would be a result of human presence and the noise of the helicopter which may cause wildlife to seek cover in areas away from gathering routes. However, large game species should return to the area within a few days. Capture activities would not cause abandonment of normal habitat areas. There would be no long-term adverse effect on wildlife.

The BLM data and past experience show that removal of excess horses from areas of wild horse concentration will improve habitat conditions for wildlife. This effect is most pronounced around water sources and would benefit both game and non-game wildlife. Maintaining wild horse populations at AML through the removal of excess wildhorses enables wildlife populations to utilize the forage that would otherwise be used by the excess wild horses. No adverse cumulative impacts to wildlife are anticipated.

No Action

Unmanaged populations of wild horses might eventually stabilize at very high numbers near what is known as their food-limited ecological carrying capacity. At these levels, range conditions would deteriorate significantly. Due to the lack of large predators to limit population growth in the HMA, wild horse numbers would eventually exceed the carrying capacity of the HMA and adjacent areas. Competition for water sources and forage resources would increase between wildlife species, specifically antelope and mule deer. Inter specific competition over time could affect antelope and mule deer, especially in crucial winter ranges. Large game species may be displaced over time and population levels and overall health of the herds would diminish.

Under this alternative, sage grouse may be impacted from deteriorated range condition if vegetation required for nesting, specifically residual grasses within and adjacent to sagebrush pockets, becomes depleted. Raptors would not be impacted by wild horses and implementation of management practices. The impacts described above would be cumulative over time.

VEGETATION AND SOILS

Proposed Action

The removal of excess wild horses from the herd area would avoid potential over-utilization of forage and reduction in vegetative ground cover. Vegetation composition, cover, and vigor would improve or be maintained, especially near water sources. Potential for competition for forage and water between wild horses, wildlife and livestock, and surface-disturbing activity around water sources would be reduced. The quantity of forage would be increased and the increased vegetative cover would protect soils and reduce erosion of the surface soil layer.

Physical surface disturbance would occur at the trap sites due to the erection of the traps, trampling by horses, and vehicle traffic. When the horses are herded some vegetation would be disturbed. There would be extreme surface disturbance in the paddocks of the trap due to the milling about by the horses; however, the total impacted area would be less than one- quarter acre per trap site. The vegetation in these areas should recover quickly. Vehicles would damage vegetation, but staying on existing roads and trails would minimize the impact.

Maintaining wild horse populations at AML would produce no adverse cumulative impacts to vegetation and soils.

No Action

Increased use over the entire HMA would adversely impact soils and vegetation health, especially around the water locations. As native plant health deteriorates and plants are lost, soil erosion increases. The shallow desert topsoil can not tolerate much loss without losing productivity and thus the ability to be revegetated with native plants. Invasive non-native plant species would increase and invade new areas following increased soil disturbance and reduced native plant vigor and abundance. This would lead to both a shift in plant composition towards weedy species and an irreplaceable topsoil and productivity loss from erosion. These impacts would be cumulative over time. There would also be increased impacts to areas outside the HMA as horses move out in search of better forage.

RECREATION

General

Recreation values are quite subjective. Those who wish to see wild horses might appreciate the increased viewing opportunities associated with increased herd sizes, so long as the condition of the horses remains good. Those who prefer other recreational activities that are degraded by an increase in the horse population might prefer to see smaller horse herds. Any change in the relative balance among species in the habitat would affect the quality of the recreational opportunities found in the HMA.

Proposed Action

Maintaining wild horse populations at established AMLs guarantees the opportunity for the public to view wild horses in a wild and free-roaming state. Although there would be fewer horses to view, the remaining horses would be in better condition than under the No Action Alternative. Additional recreational opportunities would be provided by wild horse adoption and adoption events. Since wildlife and wildlife habitat benefit from the removal of excess horses, there would be a beneficial effect for recreationists who view game and non-game species and those who hunt. There would be no adverse cumulative impacts to recreation as a result of implementing the Proposed Action.

No Action

Short-term impacts to recreationists observing wild horses on the range would be positive, as there would be more horses over a larger area. Over time, however, the condition of the wild horses would decline, as would the habitat (an adverse cumulative impact). Increases in wild horse numbers would likely mean a decline in the opportunity to enjoy wildlife-related consumptive and non-consumptive recreation. There would be no opportunity to adopt a wild horse from the area.

WILDERNESS

General

The WSA's are managed to preserve their wilderness character (naturalness, solitude, and opportunities for primitive recreation). Fundamental to this preservation is prohibition of new surface disturbance or permanent structures so that the WSAs retain the character of an area untrammeled by humans. Any impacts that degrade the naturalness of the WSA's would impair their suitability for designation as wilderness, therefore violating the nonimpairment standard of the Interim Management Policy.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action meets the non-impairment criteria as it is temporary, it would cause no surface disturbance, and no reclamation is needed. The use of a helicopter to gather wild horses is specifically allowed in handbook H-8550-1, Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Lands Under Wilderness Review (page 43). There would be a short-term impact on solitude for any visitors who are present in the WSA's while the helicopter is being used. The time frame involved is very limited. Removal of excess wild horses would help to protect the vegetative cover within the WSA's, and would be beneficial for the wild horses which remain in the area.

The Red Butte Trap Site is located just inside the boundary of the Red Butte WSA. This site would be used for approximately 2 days, to gather the small band of horses in the Fivemile area. All disturbance from the trap would be very minor and short term.

There would be no adverse cumulative impacts to wilderness as a result of implementing the Proposed Action.

No Action

Impacts of an increased wild horse herd size would probably decrease the naturalness of the WSA's and therefore impair their suitability for designation as wilderness. The previously described impacts to soils, vegetation, wildlife, wildlife habitat and watershed function would have a detrimental effect on the WSA's ecosystem. Impacts on the naturalness of the WSAs could come in many forms, primarily in the form of excessive erosion due to increased horse traffic and reduced soil stabilizing vegetative cover, and a change in the number of members of other species displaced by the increased competition for resources. Also, the deteriorated habitat would negatively impact opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. There would be no direct impacts from using the Red Butte Trap Site.

HERITAGE RESOURCES

Proposed Action

Following the requirements of the Wyoming State Protocol, impacts to historic properties, as defined by 36 CFR 800.2(e), are not anticipated because if historic properties are identified through Class III inventory, the Protocol requires mitigation of adverse effects. Where Class III inventories have not been or will not be conducted, impacts to historic properties are limited to trampling. Naturally, fewer horses would result in lesser potential impacts to historic properties.

No Action

At the current time, a determination of no action would not adversely affect historic properties. However, a substantial increase in the number of horses over time may adversely affect historic properties by trampling.

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MITIGATION, RESIDUAL AND CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

MITIGATION

Mitigative measures for each resource that may be impacted by the Proposed Action were discussed previously in the Environmental Consequences section. Additional mitigation is listed in the Wild Horse Capture Plan (Appendix) under "BLM Committed Measures". Standard operating procedures include mitigation of adverse impacts that have been encountered.

RESIDUAL IMPACTS

Residual impacts are those that would be left over at the conclusion of a particular course of action and that could not be avoided or further mitigated. Except for a temporary visual impact in the trap and wing area until vegetation is reestablished (most likely the next growing season), the Proposed Action would cause no residual impacts.

The residual impacts of the No Action Alternative would include all the impacts described in the Environmental Consequences section for livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, and watershed. These impacts would be long-lasting or permanent.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

The HMA contains a variety of resources and supports a variety of uses. There are a number of other BLM conducted and authorized activities ongoing in and adjacent to the HMA. Any alternative course of wild horse management has the opportunity to affect and be affected by those activities. Most of those activities depend in one way or another on the maintenance of a healthy landscape.

The cumulative impacts of the Proposed Action would be to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and preserve the multiple use relationship among all resources within and surrounding the Fifteenmile HMA. Maintaining wild horse populations at AML would result in no cumulative impacts to the long-term viability of the wild horse herd, and would aid in the attainment of a thriving ecological balance in their habitat. If future monitoring of the wild horse herd and genetic analysis indicated that genetic viability was threatened, horses from another HMA would be brought in to the Fifteenmile HMA to insure the long-term viability of the herd.

The cumulative impacts of the No Action Alternative would be that a thriving natural ecological balance would not be maintained, and the multiple use relationship within the Fifteenmile HMA would not be preserved. If no horses were removed from the Fifteenmile HMA, the population would increase at an annual rate of approximately 18 percent. The population size would approach 1,500 horses within the next 10 years, which is well above the carrying capacity of the HMA.

The herd would show obvious signs of ill-fitness including poor individual animal condition, low birth rates, and high mortality rates in all age classes due to disease and/or increased vulnerability to predation. In addition, supporting range conditions would noticeably deteriorate. As the population increased, competition for space would increase with all the associated stress. Social interaction would change. Horses would die of starvation, disease, or from lack of water. These impacts would be cumulative over time.

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CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management is responsible for obtaining public input on proposed actions within the wild horse program. Public input has been solicited for several actions proposed since the establishment of the Fifteenmile HMA.

In accordance with 43 CFR 4740.1(b), a formal statewide hearing regarding the use of helicopters for the roundup of wild horses in Wyoming is held each year. The public is provided an opportunity to discuss concerns and questions with BLM staff.

Extensive public scoping was conducted prior to and during the preparation of the Grass Creek RMP, which established the current decisions regarding the management of the Fifteenmile WHA. Several public meetings were held throughout the Bighorn Basin. Numerous comments were received regarding the Fifteenmile HMA, and were incorporated in the RMP to the extent possible.

PREPARERS AND REVIEWERS

Following is a list of preparers and reviewers for this Environmental Assessment:

Cameron "Cam" Henrichsen, Team Leader, Rangeland Management Specialist
Tim Stephens, Wildlife Biologist
Steve Kiracofe, Soil Scientist
Zig Napkora, Hydrologist
Dave Baker, Recreation Planner
Brian Culpepper, Archaeologist
Bruce "Smokey" Stevens, Range Technician
Kate Moore, Rangeland Management Specialist
Dallas Heller, Field Office Aviation Manager
Margy Tidemann, Writer/Editor
Don Ogaard, Environmental Planning Coordinator
Ron Hall, Supv. Natural Res. Spec., Wild Horse Program Team
Don Glenn, State Wild Horse Specialist
Joe Vessels, Assistant Field Manager - Resources

DISTRIBUTION

This environmental assessment will be provided to all wild horse interest groups on the Worland Field Office mailing list, livestock interest groups, individual livestock owners who operate in or near the HMA, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, wildlife interest groups, and interested individuals who have requested it. Additional copies are available at the Worland Field Office, P. O. Box 119, 101 South 23rd Street, Worland, WY 82401-0119.

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APPENDIX

WILD HORSE GATHERING PLAN 2000
for the
FIFTEENMILE WILD HORSE HERD MANAGEMENT AREA

Bureau of Land Management
Worland Field Office

July 2000

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WILD HORSE GATHERING PLAN 2000 for the FIFTEENMILE WILD HORSE HERD MANAGEMENT AREA WORLAND FIELD OFFICE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this plan is to outline the methods and approaches for gathering approximately 260 wild horses and removing approximately 160 wild horses from both private and BLM-administered lands in the Worland Field Office area. These wild horses would be gathered from the Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area (HMA) and the surrounding area.

BLM COMMITMENTS

- Cultural resource clearances will be conducted on all wild horse trap sites. A BLM archaeologist will be notified if any cultural resources are discovered during gathering operations or if new trap sites are selected. Appropriate action will be determined at that time.

- Trap sites will be surveyed and cleared for threatened, endangered, candidate, and sensitive plant and animal species prior to construction.

- Removal operations will be in accordance with selective removal guidelines, or the national policy in effect at the time of the gather. However, implementing selective removal criteria will not be applied if the sex ratio would be skewed to the point where herd viability is affected.

- Existing roads and trails will be used at all times, if possible.

- Gathering operations will not occur in designated wildlife crucial winter ranges from November 15 to April 30.

- Trap sites will not be located on or near sage grouse habitat during breeding or nesting periods.

- Gathering operations will avoid active raptor nests.

- Trap sites will not be constructed in riparian or wetland areas.

- Operations will not be conducted when it is so wet that resource damage would occur. If resource damage occurs during gathering operations, it will be reclaimed in accordance with BLM reclamation procedures.

- If needed, only certified weed-seed-free hay will be used during gathering operations.

- Blood or hair samples will be collected for Genetic Marker Analysis. Priority will be given to those horses released back into the population, and as resources allow, all horses will be sampled. This data will be compared to a similar analysis conducted in 1991, and provide continuing background information concerning the genetic viability of the herd. If necessary to improve genetic diversity, a few horses from a different area may be introduced into the population.

GATHERING AREAS

The Fifteenmile HMA covers approximately 83,000 acres of public, state, and private lands. The entire HMA is fenced, with no internal fences. Any horses found in areas outside of the HMA, including the

Fivemile area east of the HMA, will also be gathered. Some fences may be encountered in these areas.

CAPTURE METHODS

Helicopter drive trapping will be the primary capture method. Throughout the years this has proven to be a safe, effective, and humane method of gathering wild horses. This technique has been in use in Wyoming since June 1, 1977. Use of helicopters is in conformance with Section 9 of Public Law 92-195, which states

> "...the Secretary may use or contract for the use of helicopters or, for the purpose of transporting captured animals, motor vehicles...such use shall be undertaken only after a public hearing..."

A public hearing for the use of helicopters during gathering operations for 2000 was held on February 14, 2000 in Rock Springs, Wyoming.

All horses located outside of the HMA will be gathered and removed or returned to the HMA, before gathering operations begin. All areas outside the HMA are considered total removal areas.

Selective removal of wild horses will be based on the current *Selective Removal Policy,* as established in Instruction Memorandum 99-053. In order to achieve AML, all wild horses aged 5 years and younger may be removed and placed in the adoption program. All horses aged 6 to 9 years may be removed and placed into the adoption program after they have received gentling or training to improve their ability to be adopted. All horses aged 10 years and over will be returned to the range.

Removal of wild horses will be in accordance with the national policies in effect at the time of the gather (such as selective removal) or under the guidelines of a long-term pasturing agreement.

BLM vs CONTRACT

The horses will either be gathered by a BLM crew, a contract crew, or a combination of the two. Techniques and methods are essentially the same. Currently, two contracts between the BLM and gather contractors are in place. However, since Wyoming is not included under these contracts, a contract modification would be necessary before a contractor could be used.

HERDING AND STRESS REDUCTION PROCEDURES

Wild horses will not be herded for distances greater than 10 miles. The Authorized Officer may reduce this distance after consideration of temperature, topography, soil conditions, horse condition, or other pertinent factors. When trap locations are selected, they will be placed in as close proximity to the horses as is practical. For this reason, it is imperative that actual trap site locations remain flexible to accommodate horse distribution.

Horses will be allowed to choose their own rate of travel, and the helicopter pilot will stay well away from the animals while maintaining visual contact. As the trap is approached, pressure from the helicopter will increase. Concurrent with this action, wranglers will follow the horses and encourage them into the trap and close the gate. Several herding runs may be made in a day.

A visual barrier of plastic snow fence or jute mesh will be placed on all gates and pens. This helps reduce the possibility of injury, and the visual barrier tends to settle the horses down in the pens.

When horses are sorted in the field, the field sorting/holding facility may be one of the traps. The horses will be sorted by sex and age and the release horses will be held until the gather is completed. If the horses can not be sorted in the field, they will be transported to a holding/preparation facility for sorting and later returned to the HMA. Foals under 6 weeks old will be sorted out and hauled

separately, then reunited with their mothers at the holding facility.

When herding bands containing small foals, extra care will be exercised and operations monitored. At any time a mare and foal start to fall behind the band, the mare and foal will be dropped. If the mare refuses to leave the band to stay with her foal, then the band will be left. If a foal becomes separated from its mother, every effort will be made to assure either capture or otherwise rejoining of the mare and foal.

ROPING

The primary method for gathering wild horses in Wyoming is helicopter drive trapping. Roping may be used occasionally as a supplemental gathering technique under certain circumstances such as when a mare is captured but the foal is left behind, when a young horse refuses to enter the trap, or when there are escaped horses in an area of total removal (outside the HMA). In cases where more than occasional roping is anticipated, permission must be obtained from the Authorized Officer.

TRAP SITES

Established trap sites will normally be used. New trap sites will be established as deemed appropriate and surveyed for cultural and other values. Traps will not be constructed when soils are so saturated that resource damage would occur. In the event that resource damage does occur, the area will be reclaimed. Vehicle traffic would be restricted to existing roads and trails. Wild horse trap locations which may be used, depending upon the location of the horses at the time of the removal, are:

—Badger Creek North —Benchmark
—Badger Creek South —Burlington Pass
—Blackburn Gulch —Red Butte.

Other trap sites may be used, if necessary.

TRAP CONSTRUCTION

Traps will be constructed using 6-foot steel panels in 10- to 12-foot lengths. Main catch/holding pens are also constructed (usually three). A small pen, separate from the main holding pens, would be constructed to hold the small foals or any other animal that requires special handling. Variations in trap design may be necessary based on site-specific requirements. Sliding wooden gates will be used in the loading alley to prevent injury and a portable loading chute will be used to load horses onto the trucks. To load trailers, panels will be attached to the existing loading alley.

Wings will extend out from the trap for a variable distance depending upon the trap site. Normally, wings extend out from the trap 100 to 200 yards and are up to 100 yards wide at the mouth of the wings. Jute (a burlap-like material) is suspended from steel fence posts placed 20 to 25 feet apart. This provides the necessary visual barrier to direct the wild horses into the trap.

FENCES OR OTHER HAZARDS TO WILD HORSES

Although fences are not a major problem, they may be encountered during gathering operations, especially in areas outside of the HMA. The pilot will be briefed and provided a map, in accordance with the aviation safety plan, showing all fences or other hazards that could pose problems. If it should become necessary to move horses through fences to a trap, at least 30 feet of fence (or a fence gate, if available) will be laid back and jute, black plastic, or other material that provides a visual barrier will be placed on each side where the wire is laid back. A small wing of jute will be placed out from the fence as is necessary to guide the horses through the fence.

SORTING/HOLDING FACILITY

A sorting/holding facility will be constructed at one or more of the trap locations, or the New Burlington Group Corrals may be used. The facility may be used to sort horses, hold release horses, and hold adoptable horses

pending shipment to a preparation facility. Horses will be sorted by age and sex in accordance with the selective removal criteria. Feed and water will be provided for all horses while in the sorting/holding facility. Horses may be transported to other approved facilities for sorting and temporary holding, if the need arises.

After a specific gather area is finished, the horses selected for release will be released from the facility. If natural barriers or other impediments restrict the horses from returning to their "home range", then the horses will be transported for release. Horses selected for adoption will be transported to a holding facility, such as the Riverton Honor Farm, or directly to the Rock Springs corrals where they will be prepared for adoption. This will be done as soon as possible after capture.

PERSONNEL

BLM Personnel

There will be one wrangler foreman and five wranglers, as a general rule. The wranglers will also serve as truck drivers for BLM equipment. Contract trucks and drivers will be hired if necessary. There will also be a helicopter pilot, a fuel truck driver, and a BLM helicopter manager. Operations will usually be seven days a week, weather permitting. Additional personnel may be needed to sort, water, feed, and care for the horses, or to provide security.

Contract Crew Personnel

Normally, a contract crew is composed of a lead wrangler, up to six wranglers, a supervisor, and a helicopter pilot and fuel truck driver.

EQUIPMENT

A semi-tractor and straight deck stock trailer with a capacity of 30 to 33 horses will be used. A stock truck, with a maximum load of 14 head, can also be used. A one-ton flatbed truck and two-compartment 26-foot horse trailer can haul four saddle horses and up to six separated wild horses. Other equipment may be used as needed.

All equipment will be inspected prior to use and will be in good condition and wood shavings will be used on flooring to help provide secure footing

TRANSPORTATION

Straight-deck stock trailers, stock trucks, and horse trailers will be used to transport the horses from the trap site to the Riverton Honor Farm or the Rock Springs corrals to be prepared for adoption. Contract trucks/trailers that are routinely used to haul wild horses may be used. All equipment will be inspected prior to use and will be in good condition. Wood shavings will be used on flooring to help provide secure footing. All trailers and stock trucks will be loaded loose enough to that if a horse should fall it will have enough room to regain its footing.

HUMANE DESTRUCTION AND DISPOSAL

Any wild horse requiring destruction, as determined by the Authorized Officer, will be destroyed and disposed of in accordance with Instruction Memorandum 98-141. Humane destruction of wild horses is provided for in the Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, as amended, Section 3 (b) 2 (A), 43 CFR 4730.1, and BLM Manual 4730 (Destruction of Wild Horses and Burros and Disposal of Their Remains).

BRANDED AND CLAIMED HORSES

Branded and/or claimed horses will be transported to the preparation/holding facility. Ownership will be determined under the estray laws of the State of Wyoming by a Wyoming Brand Inspector. Collection of gather fees and any appropriate trespass charges will be collected at the time of change of possession.

VETERINARIAN SERVICES

A veterinarian will not normally be at the trap sites or field sorting facilities. Several veterinarians are available in Worland and Cody, and will be on call should the need arise. Under the terms of the current Memorandum of Understanding with the United States Department of Agriculture, a USDA veterinarian may also be used. A veterinarian inspects the horses that are transported to the preparation facility for sorting or adoption within 24 hours of arrival. Should the need for a veterinarian arise before this time, they are locally available and will be called to assist or provide advice.

PUBLIC INTEREST

There may be viewing and photographing opportunities at one or more of the trap sites. The Worland Field Office Public Affairs Officer, or other BLM employees, will assist in the control of these groups to that they do not add unnecessary stress to the horses or interfere with the gathering operations. Other requests will be considered as they are received. All media and other visitors will be expected to comply with the directions of a BLM employee assigned to this task.

SAFETY

All Rock Springs Field Office wild horse gathering crew safety procedures will be followed. Only skilled, experienced personnel will be involved in the gathering operations, handling, and transportation of the horses.

An aviation special use plan specific to this roundup will be prepared by the Worland Field Office. Operations will conform with the provisions of the Aerial Capture, Eradication, and Tagging of Animals contract prepared by the U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Aircraft Services (OAS). All flights will be in accordance with BLM aviation policy. Passengers will not be allowed in the helicopter during gathering. Transport of other than BLM personnel, at all times, is strictly prohibited.

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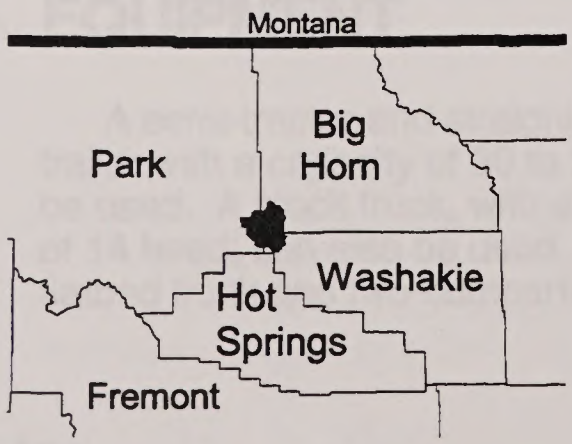

Fifteenmile Wild Horse Herd Management Area

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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

STATE OF WYOMING

PRIVATE LANDS

Herd Management Area boundary

BLM LIBRARY
BLDG 50, ST-150A
DENVER FEDERAL CENTER
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